

***Suburban Horror Story: A Study in the Manipulation of Suburban
Architectural Typologies***

An Honors Thesis (ARCH 402/HONR 499)

by

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Abstract:

There is no denying that a generally accepted design language is evident in the architecture of North American vernacular homes. Gabled roofs, turrets and double-hung windows are familiar, comfortable and undeniably domestic. What is the result when these suburban typologies are challenged, manipulated and forced to evolve? "Suburban Horror Story" explores dualities and uncomfortable nestling by introducing a new program to the shell of an existing Folk Victorian house. Through this process, a new design is created that seeks to comment on the strange similarities between fast food restaurants and domestic architecture, as well as the larger state of suburban American life.

Acknowledgments:

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Suburban Horror Story:

A Study in the Manipulation of Suburban Architectural Typologies

This thesis exists as an independent project among a 13-person architectural design studio. Each student in the studio course was presented with the same design problem: to select a typical North American housing style dating no earlier than the late 19th century, to analyze this house, and to manipulate it in some way in relation to the introduction of a new program (or intended function). Through this process students were meant to question the typological norms of conventional domestic architecture and to seek an evolution of the generally accepted architectural language of a home. In addition, a furthered understanding of the relationship between interior volumes and exterior expression with respect to the function of a space was to be achieved. Although the design process is rarely linear, this project involved three main stages: research and analysis, conceptual development and design, and production of presentation graphics and models.

In the beginning, several readings with significance in the field of architecture, as well as a relevance to the particular design problem, served as influential and inspiring springboards for conceptual development. For instance,

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's *Learning from Las Vegas* provides an unexpected architectural perspective of Las Vegas. In the essay "Ugly and Ordinary Architecture, or The Decorated Shed," Venturi and Scott-Brown discuss architecture's role in communication stating that "architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building (Scott-Brown and Venturi 87)." In addition, *Complexity and Contradiction*, also written by Venturi, argues for architectural misalignments and idiosyncrasies, in contrast to clean, calculated Modernism. Venturi seeks "a complex and contradictory architecture based on the richness and ambiguity of modern experience, including that experience which is inherent in art (Venturi 16)." A reading from *Horror in Architecture*, by Joshua Comoroff and Ker-Shing Ong called "The Trojan Horse" wonders about the possible relationship between interior and exterior in architecture. An ominous comparison is made to a "psycho" whose "body might house a second-self that creeps among the detritus of the fractured or fragmented individual (Comoroff and Ong 145)." In essence, the reading ponders architecture with hidden or latent qualities. Each of these readings created an atmosphere appropriate for the exploration of the deviation from accepted architectural language.

Searching through several books, including *A Field Guide to American Houses* by Virginia and Lee McAlester as well as *American Vernacular Buildings*

and Interiors by Herbert Gottfried and Jan Jennings, for images, drawings and descriptions eventually led to an especially interesting architectural style to analyze. I was particularly drawn to Folk Victorian style homes for a variety of reasons.

The Folk Victorian style, common throughout the eastern half of the United States between 1870 and 1910 is “defined by the presence of Victorian decorative detailing on simple folk house forms, which are generally much less elaborated than the Victorian styles that they attempt to mimic (McAlester 309).” In a sense, the occupied volume of the Folk Victorian home is very simple, allowing for little more space than necessity warrants. It can consist of a number of different varieties, from “front-gabled roof” to “gable front and wing” but is always paired with “spindlework detailing or flat, jigsaw cut trim” reminiscent of the more opulent decoration found on many Victorian style homes (McAlester, 309). This decoration was meant to elevate status. The Folk Victorian style can be understood as the offspring of Folk National railroad homes and Victorian style homes.

In the Folk Victorian home, I was intrigued by the apparent duality between legibility and illegibility. The simple volume, derivative of the Folk National style, consists of symmetrical, gabled facades featuring the five-sided shape that is immediately recognizable. If there is a geometry that can most often be associated with a house, it is this pentagonal shape - a box with a triangle on top. In this way the Folk National possesses an architectural honesty. And yet,

the introduction of the faux-opulent decoration brings the honesty and legibility into question. The house is trying to masquerade as something else altogether. I was incredibly interested in this strange duality, which led to the selection of the Folk Victorian as a style to study and interpret.

The next step was a furthered analysis of a specific Folk Victorian house. After searching for images and drawings of a properly documented Folk Victorian house, this process involved the reproduction of the house as a 3-dimensional model created in Rhinoceros 5 (a commonly used 3D modeling design software). The act of modeling the house using this computer software brought about a furthered understanding of the design and function of the building. Spending time recreating the existing conditions can heighten awareness for these characteristics. The chosen house consisted of a rectangular plan, roughly split into thirds on the first and second level. One would enter the living room at the front of the house, and the kitchen and dining room sit adjacent to one another in the back. On the second level, the master bedroom makes up the front portion of the home, and two smaller bedrooms make up the opposite end. A shared bathroom is situated between. The house features a symmetrical gabled roof, and a porch applied to one end. In Folk Victorian style, decoration is applied around the banisters, trim, and at the gable peak.

Simultaneous to this interpretation of the home, the decision was made to incorporate another suburban typology, the fast food restaurant. In a studio that sought to challenge the generally accepted norms of American housing that

generally exist in suburban environments, it seemed natural to incorporate another omnipresent component of the suburbs. The reading of the Folk National house brought about an interest in fast food and the architectural idiosyncrasies that accompany it. Through research and observation, I discovered that fast food restaurants exhibited elements of domesticity and shared characteristics with Folk Victorian architecture.

Fast food restaurants have exploited this relationship with domesticity. Some of the original McDonald's slogans, coined by Ray Kroc, made statements such as "You Deserve A Break Today" and "Give Mom The Night Off (O'Connell, 239)!" These statements are troubling in regard to their assumptions about the role of women in a domestic environment, but beyond that they suggest that McDonald's, or other similar chains, could exist as the house or kitchen that you never have to clean yourself.

Additionally, through the observation of images of iconic fast food restaurants I devised several common themes. There appeared to be a strange duality between legibility and disguise in fast food architecture, similar to that present in the Folk Victorian style. In essence, fast food restaurants seem to explicitly state their existence while also hiding away. They attempt to become something close to a house by distorting and appropriating domestic architectural elements such as the pitched roof on a McDonald's. They do not shy from garishness or colorful provocation, but they also suggest that you could be in a kitchen in someone's home. These and other observations became important to

the development and advancement of the concept of the project. It became clear that the home and the fast food restaurant might exist together along an evolutionary path that moves from private domesticity toward public domesticity and privileges the kitchen and dining room. I began to wonder what might happen when this path was explored or navigated to find a result that was both a house and a fast food restaurant, or maybe neither – occupied by a family and a restaurant.

With research and precedent knowledge completed and a conceptual goal defined, the iterative and rigorous design process began. This stage of project development made up the most extensive portion of time. It consisted of continuous presentations and critiques of sketches, drawings, digital renders and study models in order to define and refine design moves and operations to be deployed on the existing structure. As the design operations went through several phases and changes, a new conclusion was reached. It became clear that the original Folk Victorian home should retain a semblance of its existing design quality. In a sense, the DNA should be extracted and reorganized in the home, but it should not become something different altogether. This visual comparison between the normative origin and the manipulated product seemed to make a much stronger statement than a complete destruction and reinterpretation of what existed. Thus, a few relatively simple operations were enacted upon the primitive house as part of an evolutionary process toward a fast food restaurant/house hybrid.

The kitchen served as the space that held the strongest relationship between the function of the original house and that of a fast food restaurant. Therefore, any manipulation of the kitchen should serve as a catalyst for similar reactions throughout the rest of the house. The kitchen served as an anchor point, and any changes to it would result in a change in another location. It started with a quite obvious but necessary modification of scale. The kitchen grows in size in order to accommodate and comply with the programmatic necessities of a fast food kitchen, including grills, fryers, and assembly space. As the kitchen grows it begins to intersect with the subsequent spaces on the first floor, the living room and the dining room. This intersection forces the rooms to shift and rotate in order to accommodate this change. Several iterations of the specific degree of this shift and rotation were performed before a final composition was reached. It was determined that the quantitative degree of change was unimportant. Instead, the fact that there was a detectable change in the orientation and a breach of the original exterior volume of these spaces communicated the conceptual narrative efficiently.

Next, a vertical shaft rises from the kitchen in order to allow for necessary ventilation and release of exhaust from the industrial grills and fryers below. This shaft, perhaps derivative of the original chimney, punctures the second level of the home, intersecting spaces and setting off further reactions on the second floor. The three bedrooms and the bathroom are now forced to shift and be resituated similarly to the subsequent rooms on the first floor. It was pointed out

in a particular review during the process that this shifting of rooms around both the kitchen and the chimney reoriented the house around its hearth. This happy-accident created an ironic critique of the tendency to forget that human origins of habitability began by gathering around the hearth.

As the interior volumes have shifted and breached the original shell of the house, the interior has become dominant over the subordinate exterior. What used to constrain, now must react. This design move would serve the purpose of challenging the original relationship between interior and exterior evident in the Folk Victorian. The exterior, made up of vinyl siding, is forced to adjust, wrap-around, and consume these misaligned objects on the interior. This creates an almost clumsy packaging that attempts to resolve the altered interior. A decision was made at this point in the design process, that silliness and clumsiness as an aesthetic choice could make a strong statement about the nature of the project. The house has been forced to “put on weight” to accommodate for the injection of a fast food programmatic change.

As design development reached final stages in form, composition and detailing, it was time to begin the representation stage of the project. This involves the creation of drawings, diagrams, graphics, and physical models that can be used to represent the project both conceptually and aesthetically. The requirements of the studio course set in place a $1/8" = 1'$ scale site model, to be assembled in a large cul-de-sac of deviated houses created by the thirteen

students. In addition, a larger $\frac{1}{4}" = 1'$ scale model was required to exhibit a higher level of detailing.

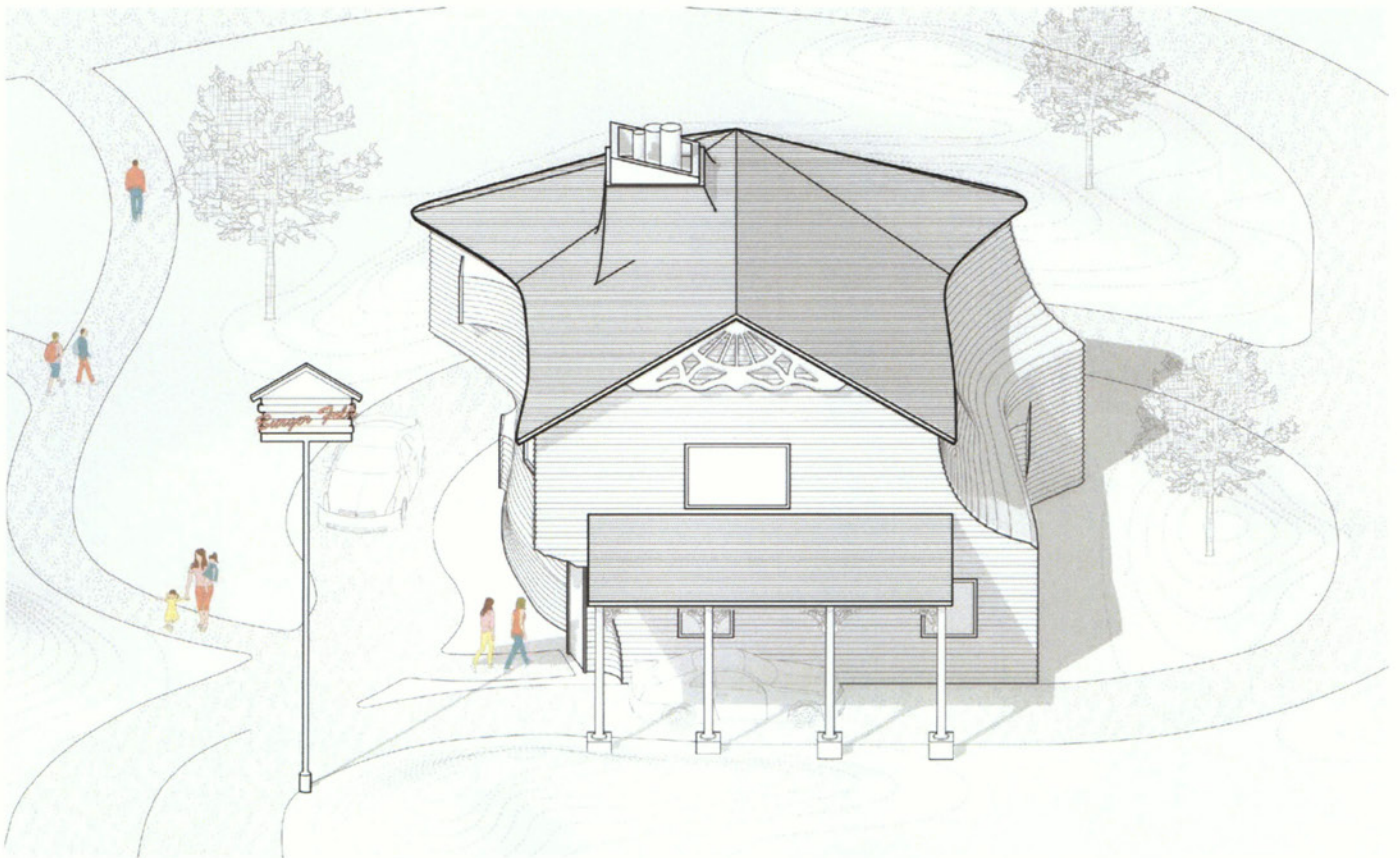
Due to the complex geometries of the deviated house it became necessary to use a 3D-printer to create the small-scale site model, rather than attempting more analog processes of hand making. A Form-2 printer that produces plastic resin printed models was used in order to reach a specific level of detail. The use of this piece of digital fabrication technology allowed for the rapid production of the exterior shell of the house, with horizontal striations to represent siding. This became a physical artifact, a hand-held model piece used for representation and visual clarity during the final presentation.

The production of the larger $\frac{1}{4}" = 1'$ model became an important exploration into the idiosyncrasies of the interior spaces and the objects and figures that occupy them. The silly situations that arise from these two disparate functions occupying shared spaces were put on display here. Borrowing from modeling and representation techniques of contemporary architects such as Andrew Kovacs, the model was used as a way to set up vignettes of spatial uses. The model was detailed with finish patterns, wallpapers, and various furniture pieces. It was populated with scale figures. These objects were placed and reorganized to offer ideas about the way the dining room could vacillate between a family's dinner table and a public restaurant-style seating arrangement.

Finally, decisions had to be made regarding the ways in which the project would be represented through drawing and rendering as well. I became

interested in drawings that could stand in contrast to the almost-unsettling, but humorous nature of the project statement. Essentially, the drawings were meant to be clean, elegant line drawings with sparing use of bold color. This restraint added another level of irony to the project in its representation of clumsiness or dirtiness in a clean manner. Drawings were produced using the 3D digital model created with Rhino software. The V-Ray plugin used for rendering provided shadows, and line-work exported from this model was edited and refined using Adobe Illustrator.

In its final state, the project exists as an artifact of suburban life that is as familiar as it is unfamiliar, and as provocative as it is mundane. The design problem asked for the challenging of generally accepted norms, and an exploration into the manipulation of established architectural design language. Through the design and research process, the project became something like an architectural critique, perhaps in the same vein of Adolf Loos' infamous Chicago Tribune Tower competition submission ("The First Tribune", 1). Through his satirical submission he made a statement about the state of architectural regression at the time. The use of humor and irony plays a role in this project, and in architectural as a larger discipline, in that it can provide both subliminal and overstated critique while also fostering an appreciation for a subversion of the restrictive rules and regulations of typical architectural practice. As much as this project may exist as an exaggerated critique of the house and suburban life, it is also an innocent exploration of "what if..."



"This project deals with the injection of a foreign program (more specifically a fast food restaurant) into a typical housing typology as part of an exploration of levels of domesticity in private and public suburban spaces..."



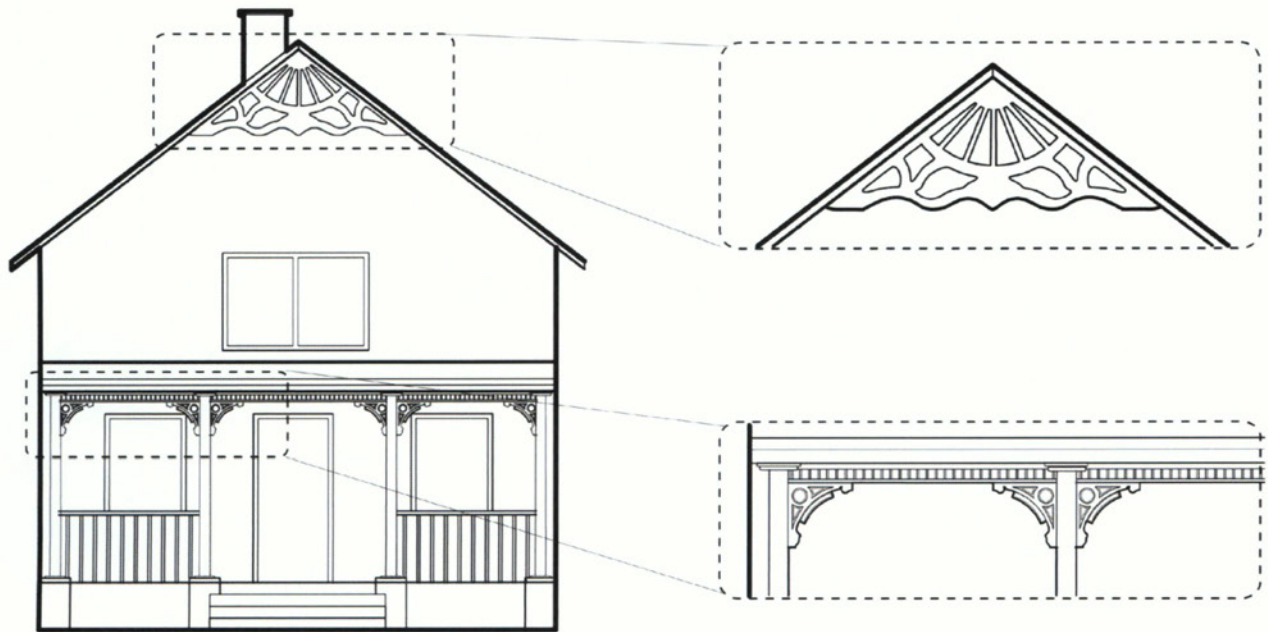
folk national

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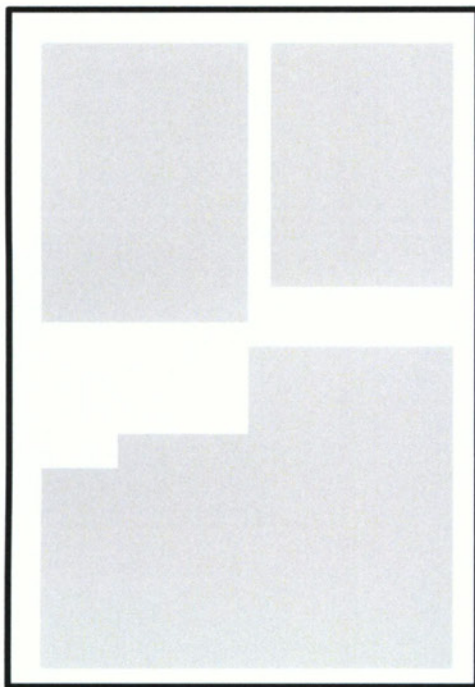


victorian

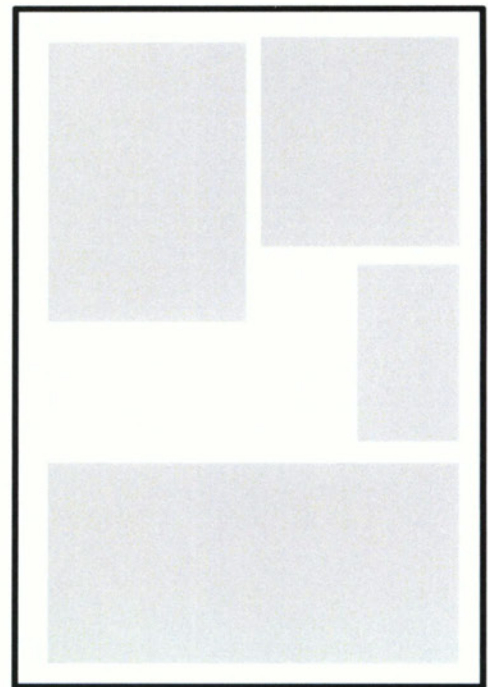
The Folk Victorian is, in a way, the offspring of the Folk National style and Victorian style. Folk National homes generally consist of a simple massing that allows for little more than necessity. This is paired with opulent or faux-opulent two dimensional decoration from Victorian homes...



The home I worked with consists of a legible five-sided façade that is extruded backwards. It is symmetrical and does not privilege either side until a porch is applied and decides on a front for the home. Decoration is applied at the corners, in a sense highlighting them, and in another sense diffusing or dissolving them. The house, though still legible, begins to disguise or camouflage itself in an act of refuge...



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Additionally the home consists of a regular volumetric shell that constrains the interior volumes. I viewed the interior volumes as subordinate to this regular exterior, and there does not seem to be any one interior volume that is dominant...



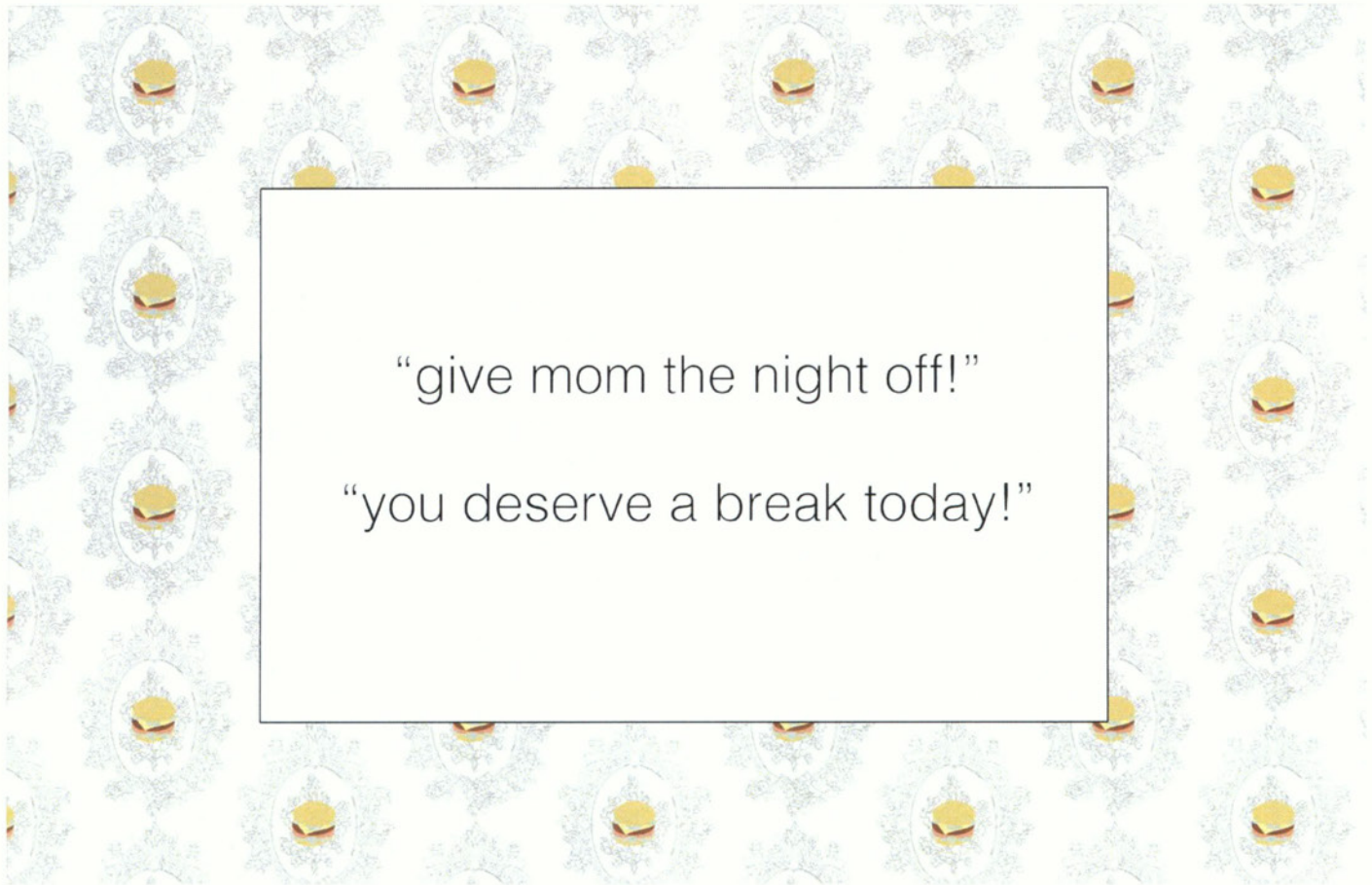
I began to become interested in another suburban typology – the fast food restaurant. In some ways, like the home I studied, there is a strange duality between legibility and disguise in fast food restaurants. They attempt to become something close to a house by distorting and appropriating domestic architectural elements such as the pitched roof...



They do not shy from garishness or colorful provocation – but they also seem to suggest that you could be in something like a kitchen at someone's home...



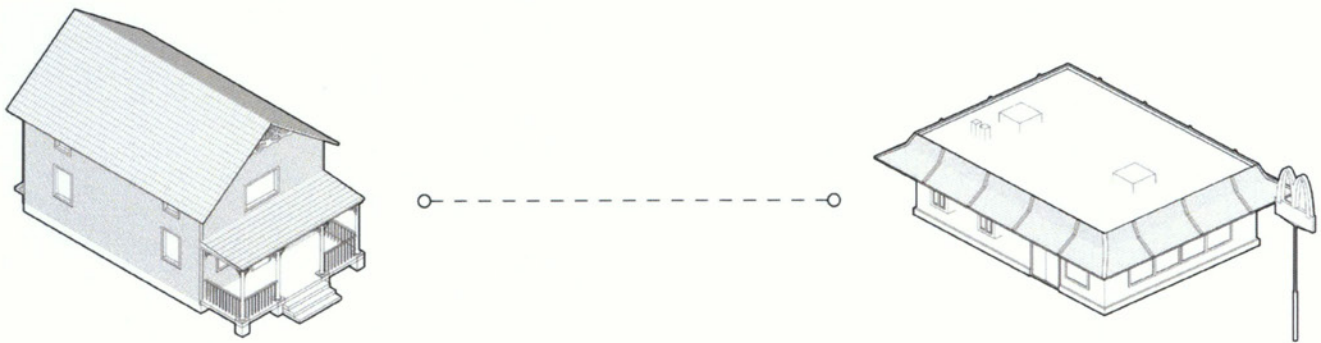
Although they may be working to hide as something else, they still often communicate exactly what they are. Even when a new program takes over, a Pizza Hut is still a Pizza Hut...



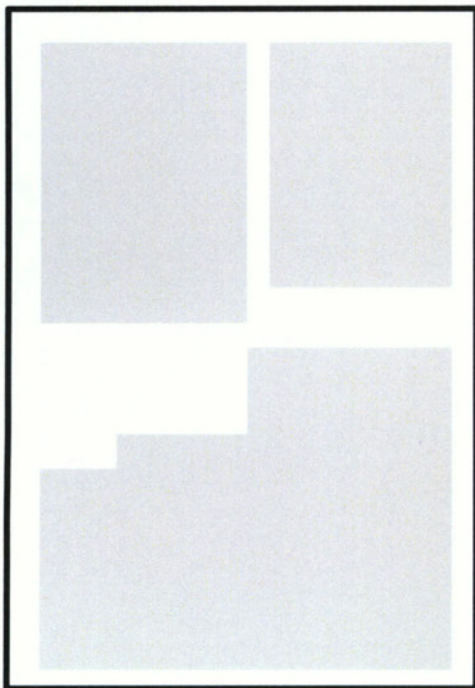
“give mom the night off!”

“you deserve a break today!”

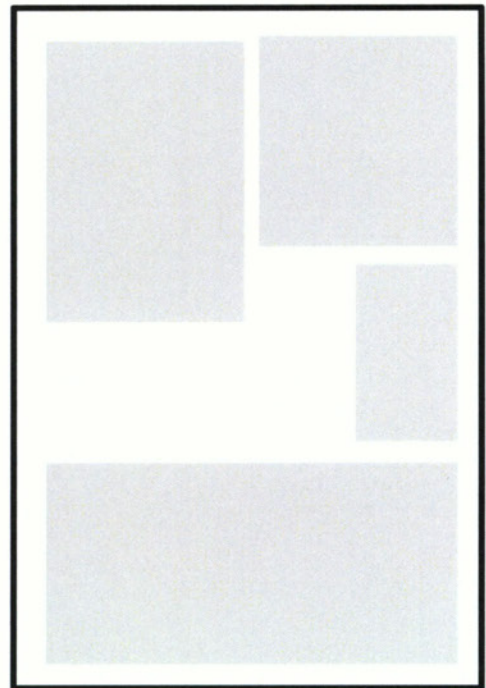
This close relationship with domesticity has been utilized intentionally by fast food. These McDonald's slogans from Ray Kroc suggest that McDonald's could stand in as the house, or at least the kitchen, that you never have to clean yourself...



I suggest that the home and the fast food restaurant may exist together along an evolutionary path that moves from private domesticity toward public domesticity that privileges the kitchen and dining room. I began to wonder what might happen when this path was explored or navigated to find a result that was both a house and a fast food restaurant, or maybe neither – occupied by a family and a restaurant...

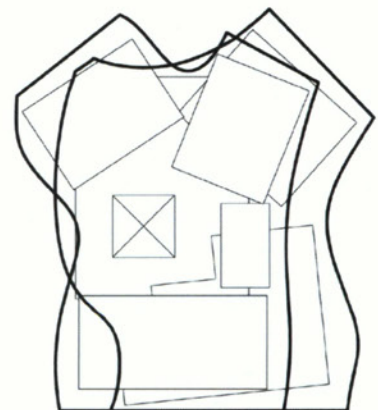
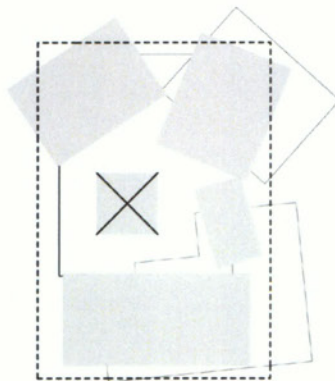
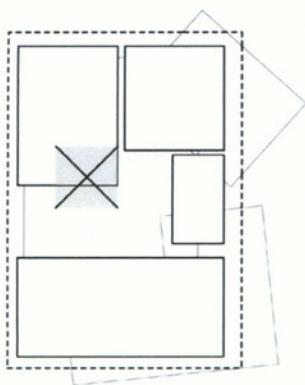
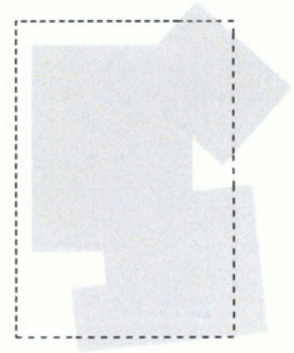
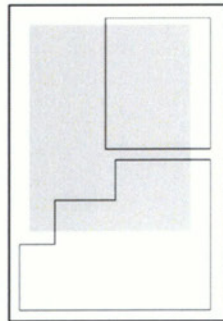
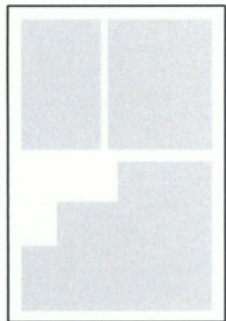


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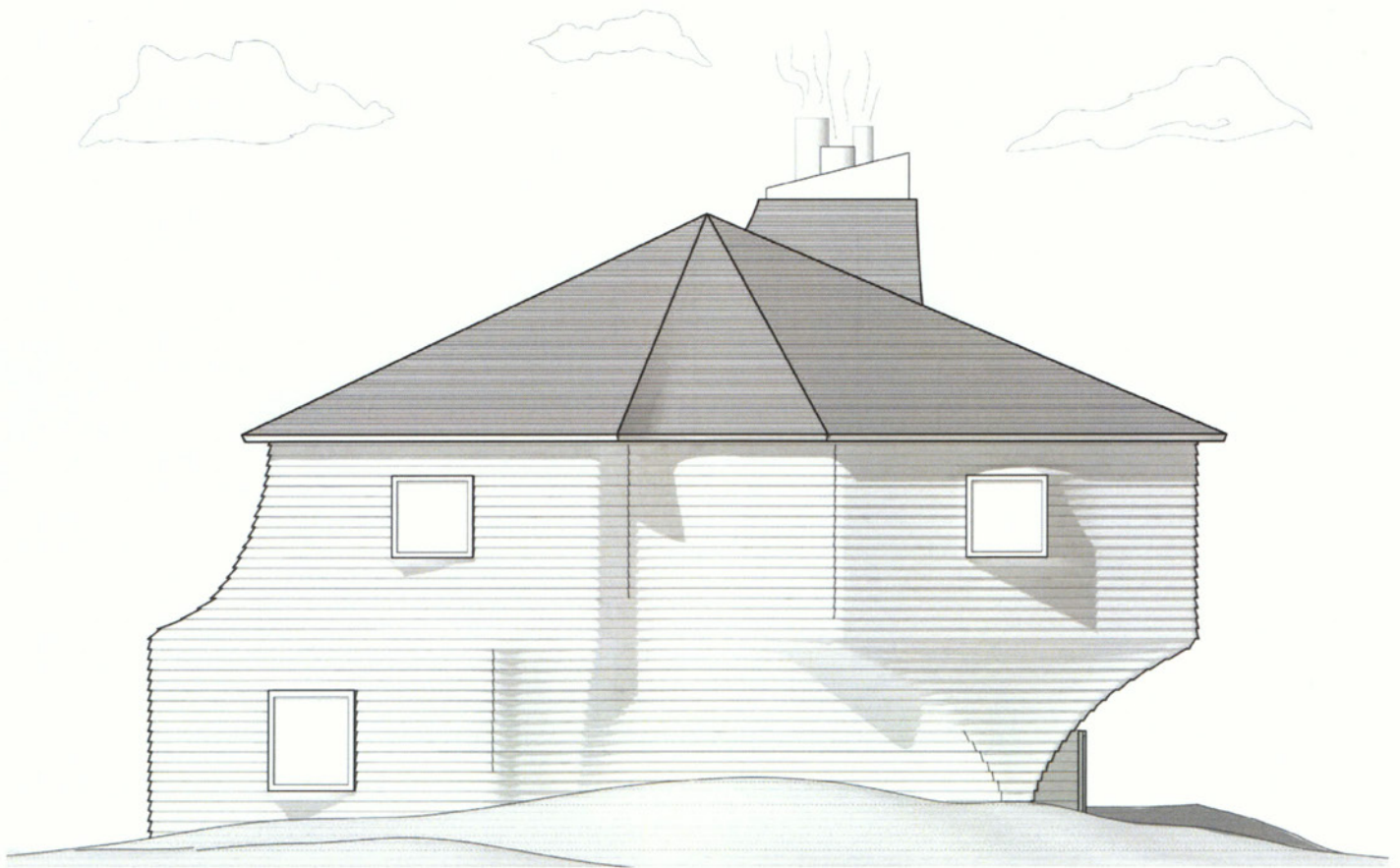
Looking back at the original house and the relationship between interior and exterior, I wanted to try to challenge the relationship of the dominant exterior and subordinate interior...



The kitchen is chosen as the catalyst of change as it grows in size to accommodate the necessity of program from a fast food restaurant. The subsequent volumes (dining room and living room) are forced to shift out of the way. Next a vertical element rises from the kitchen, which forces the bedrooms and bathroom on the upper level to resituate themselves as well. The house has begun to gather around the hearth and then the exterior volume, now subordinate to these interiors, must adjust, wrap around and consume these objects...



The exterior creates an almost clumsy packaging that tries to resolve the changes on the interior. Though the siding that wraps the home may try to hide these shifts, it begins to amplify them at the same time...



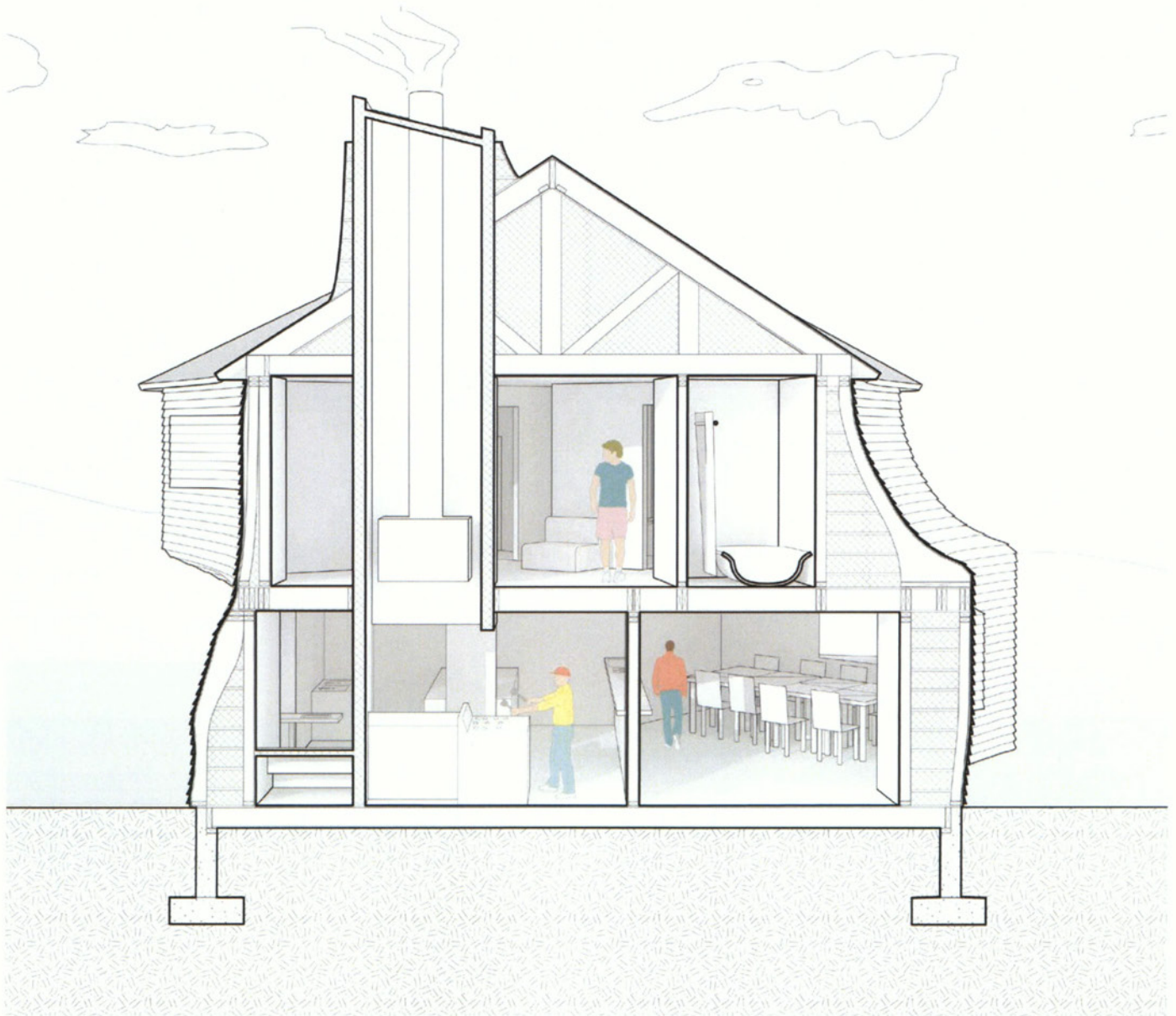
The house has been forced to "put on weight" to accommodate the introduction of programmatic adjustments...



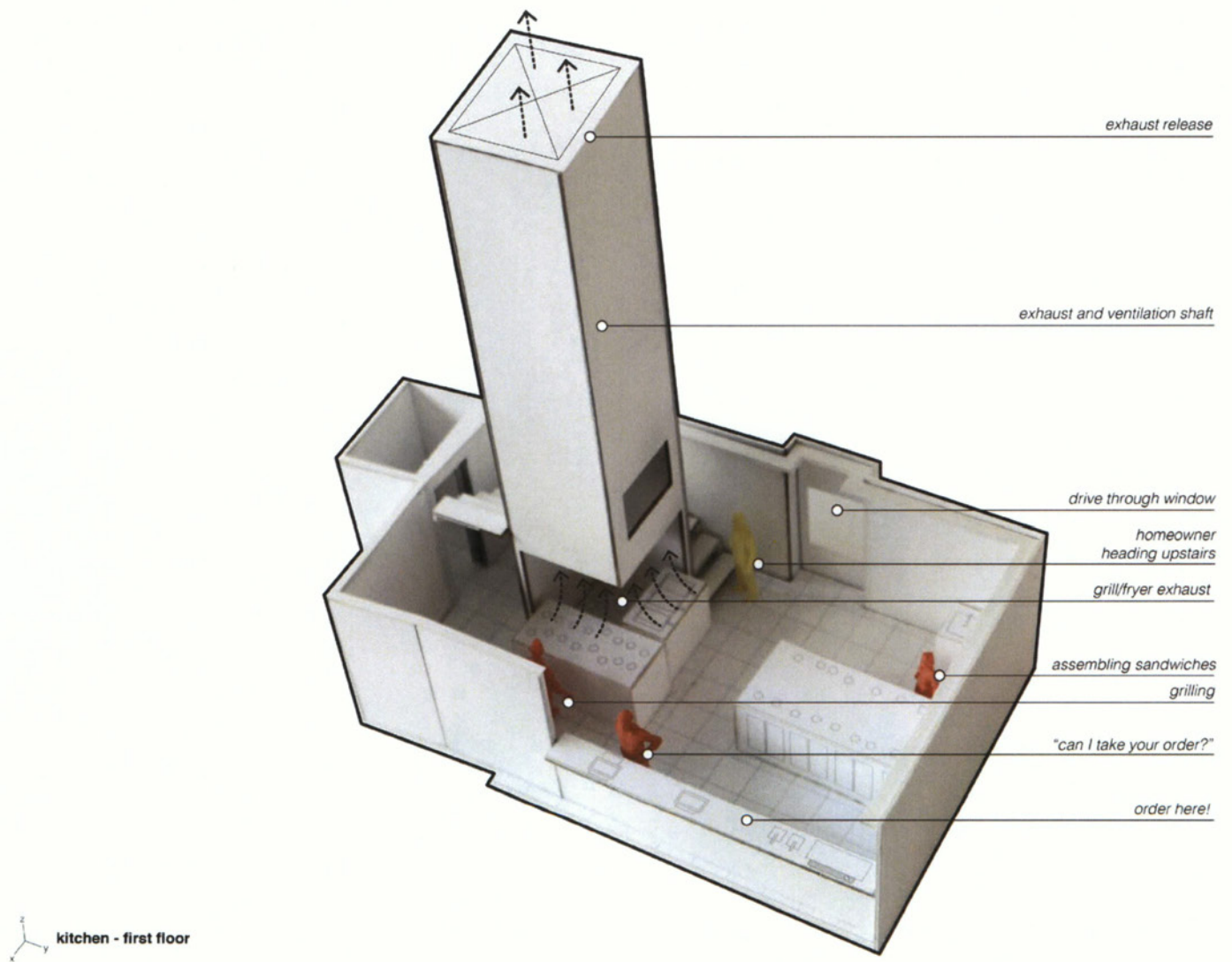
In plan, the allocation of program can be seen...



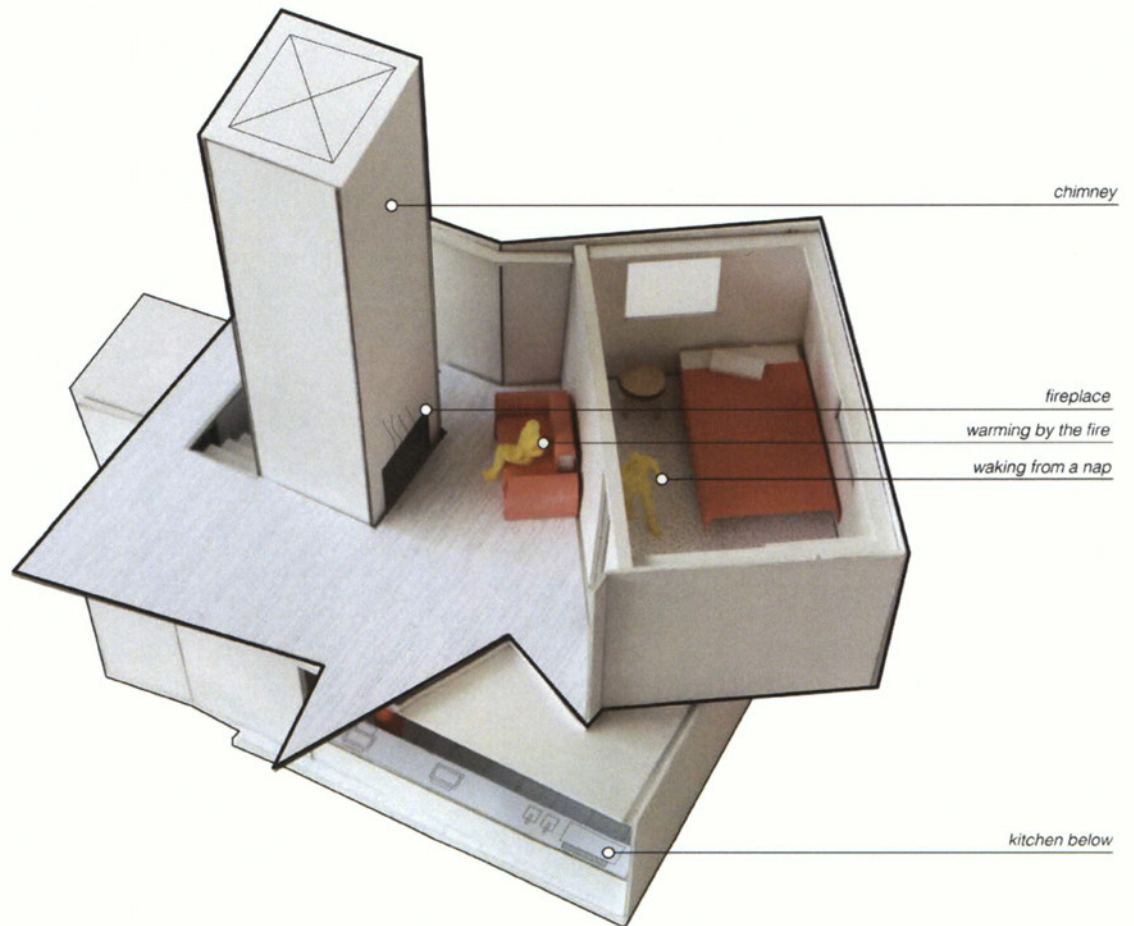
The volumes largely correlate to their original function but with slight, necessary changes...



The section communicates some programmatic relationships as well. The upper level is occupied by the family but still infiltrated by this vertical shaft from the kitchen. The deformation of typical platform framing can be seen as well...

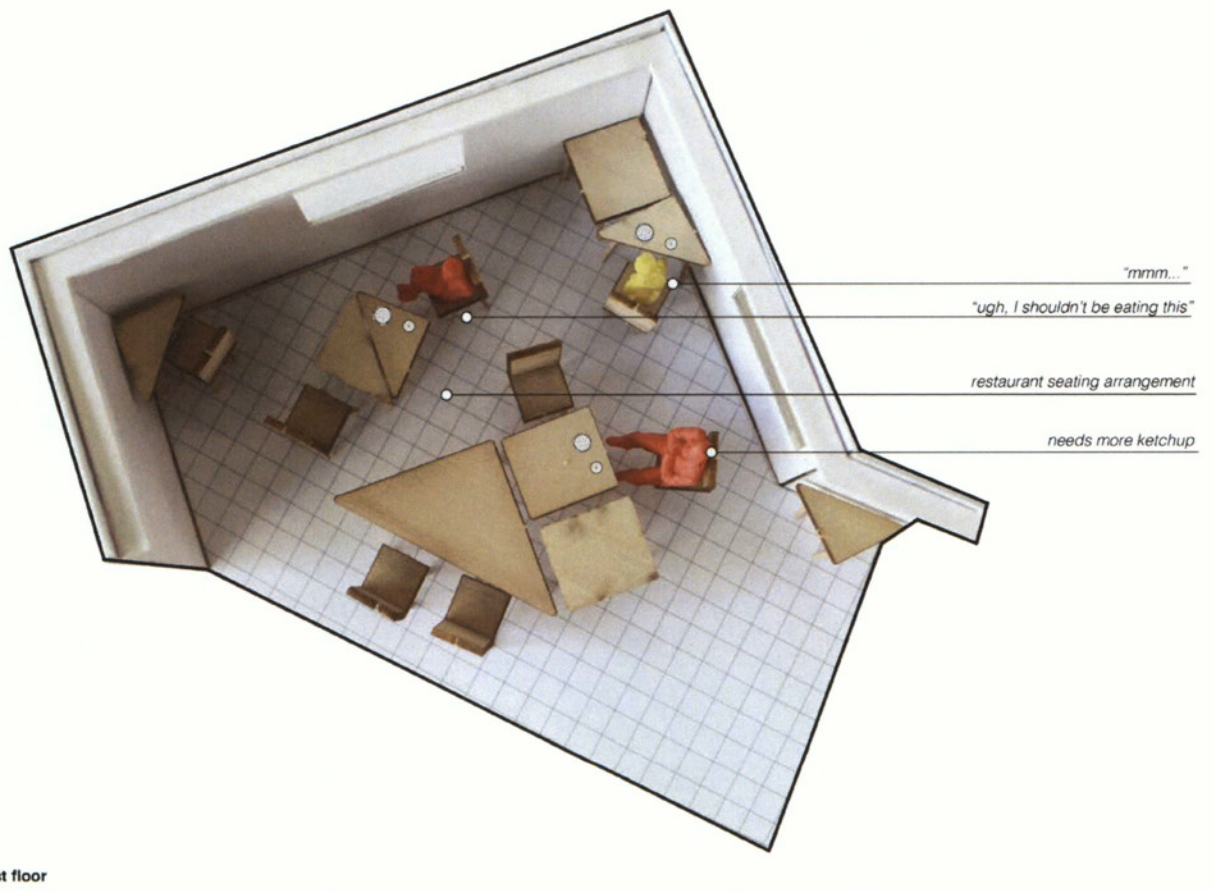


Studying the idiosyncrasies of these manipulated interior volumes as well as the objects and figures that occupy them became important to understand how the house and the fast food restaurant would try to situate themselves within the same volume. There is a vertical shaft that releases exhaust from the kitchen –

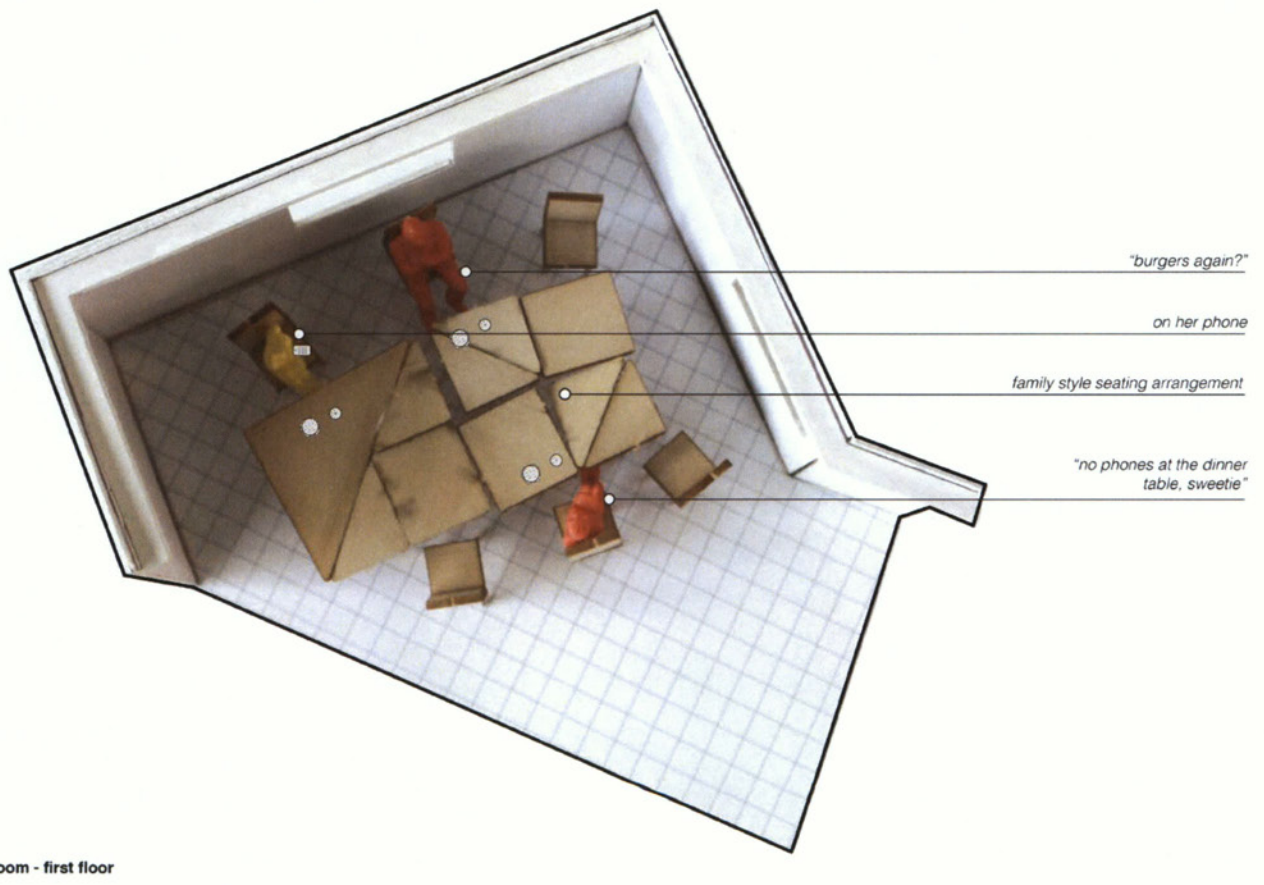


 family space - second floor

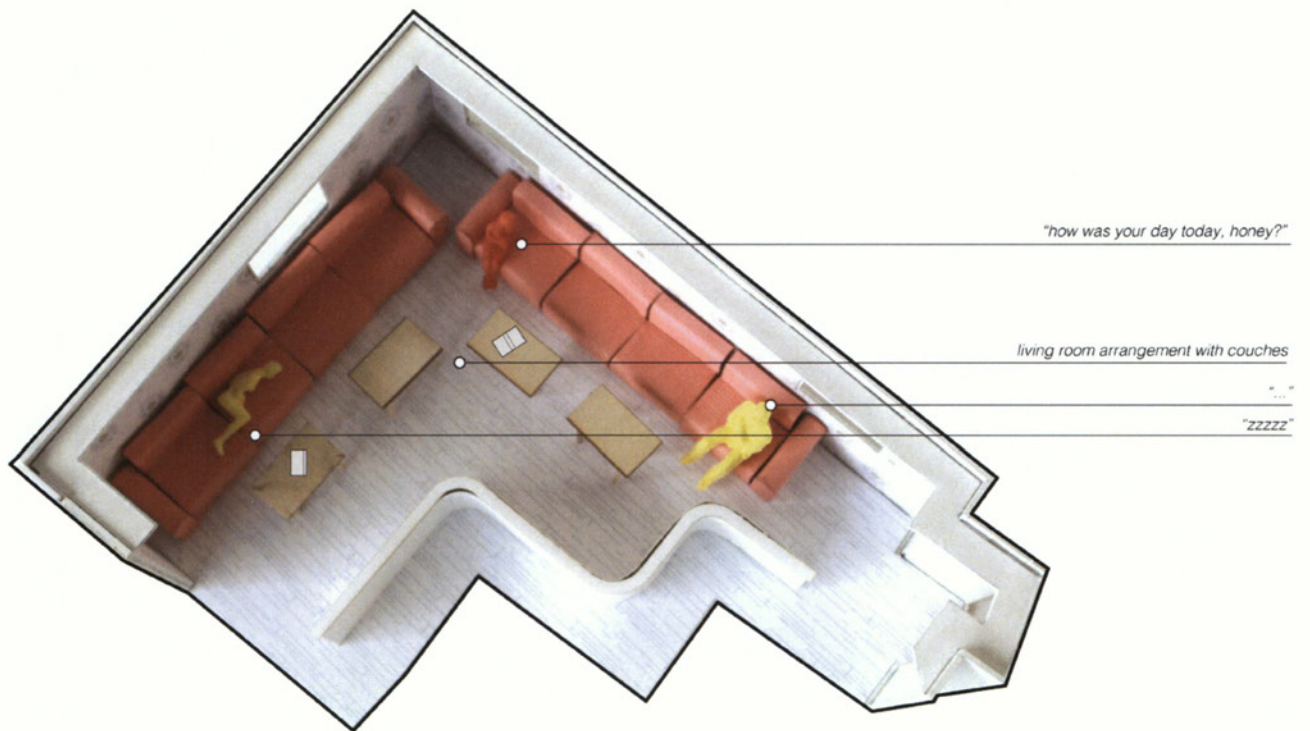
But also functions as a fireplace, chimney, and hearth for the family to gather and warm around up above...



The simple reorganization of objects inside the dining room can allow it to evolve from family style dining...

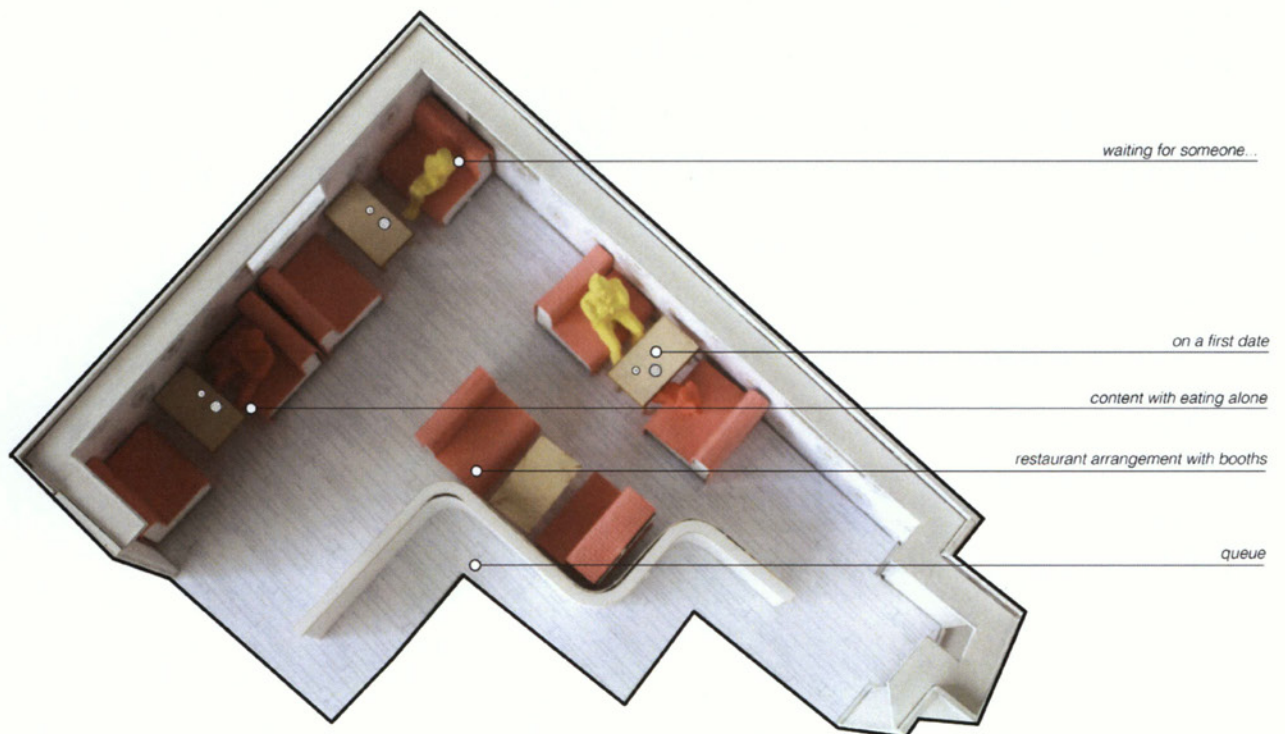


To restaurant-style dining situations....



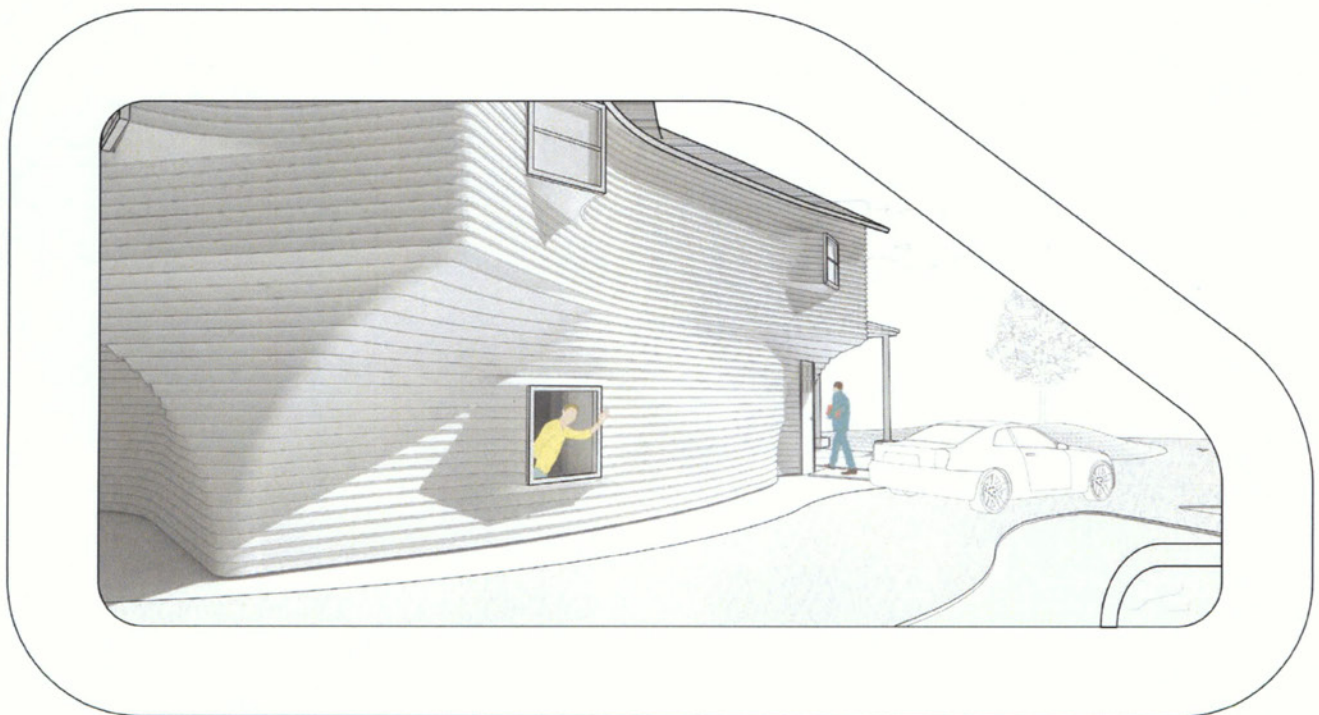
living room - first floor

Similar, in the living room space, the couches that serve as lounge space for a family are broken apart and shifted to accommodate the fast food program –

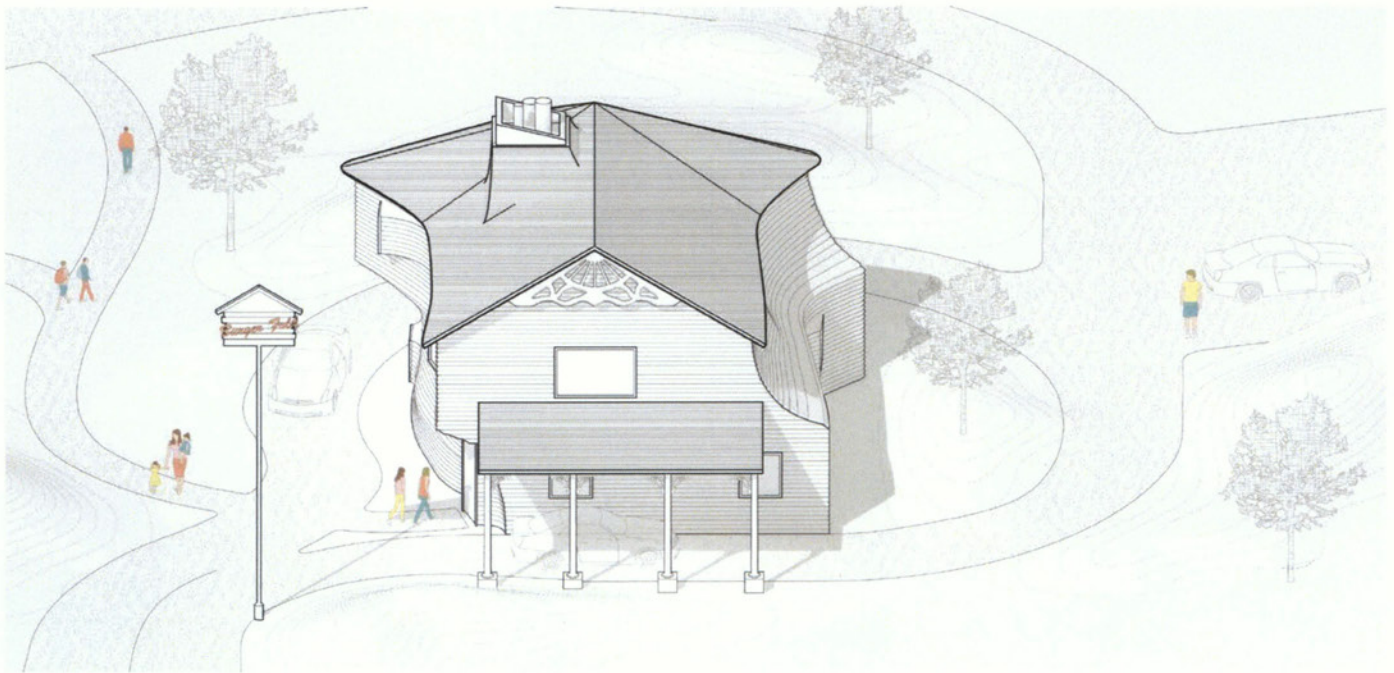


living room - first floor

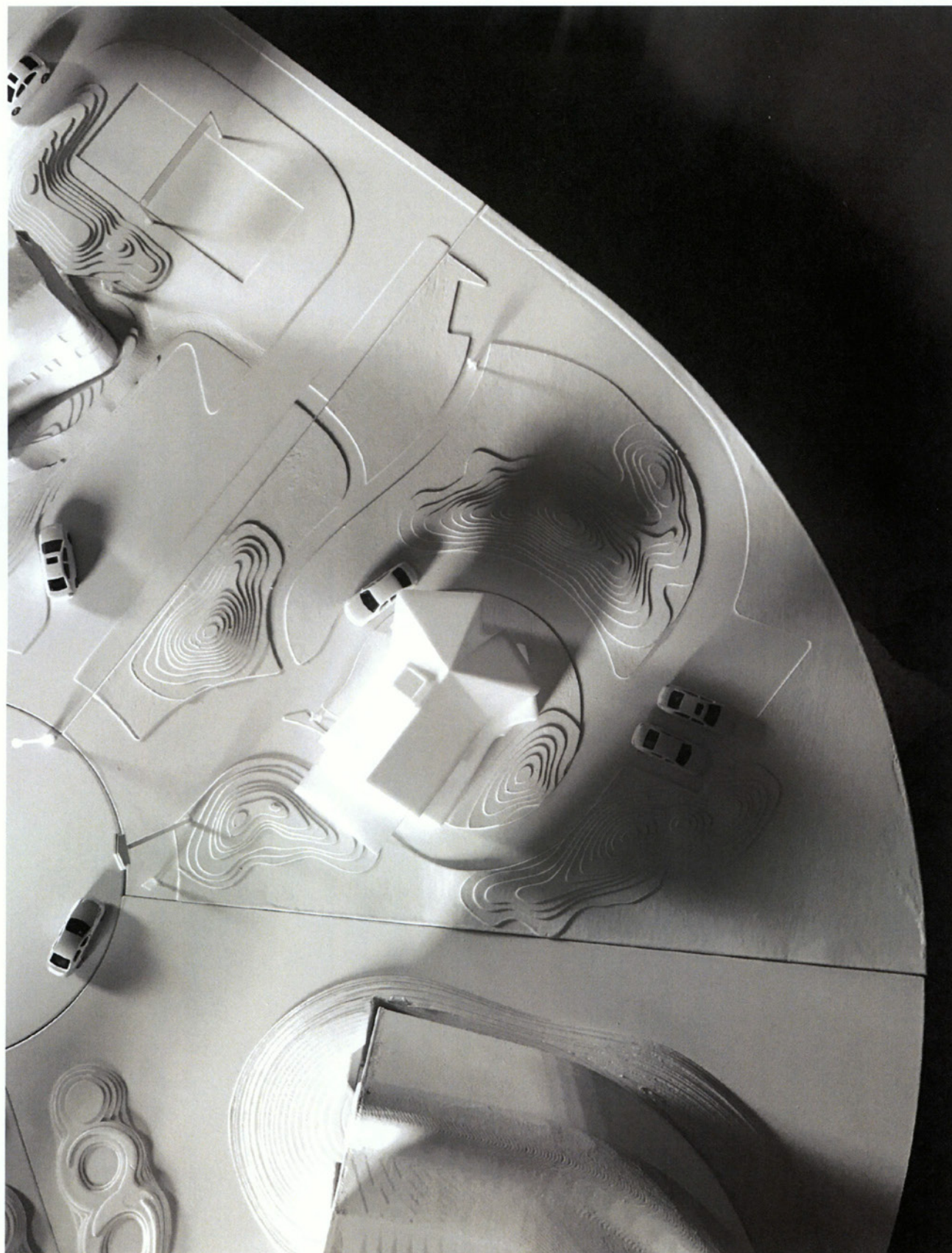
Becoming booth seating for guests. These spaces vacillate in their function...

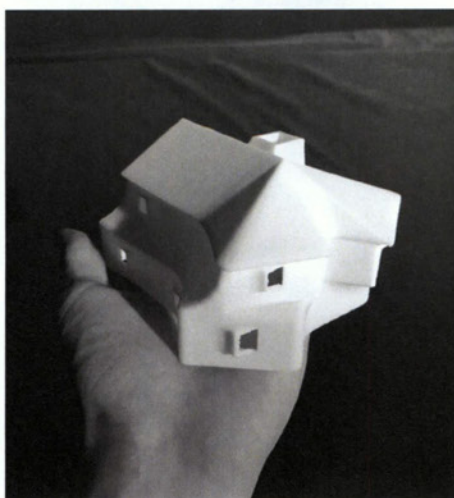
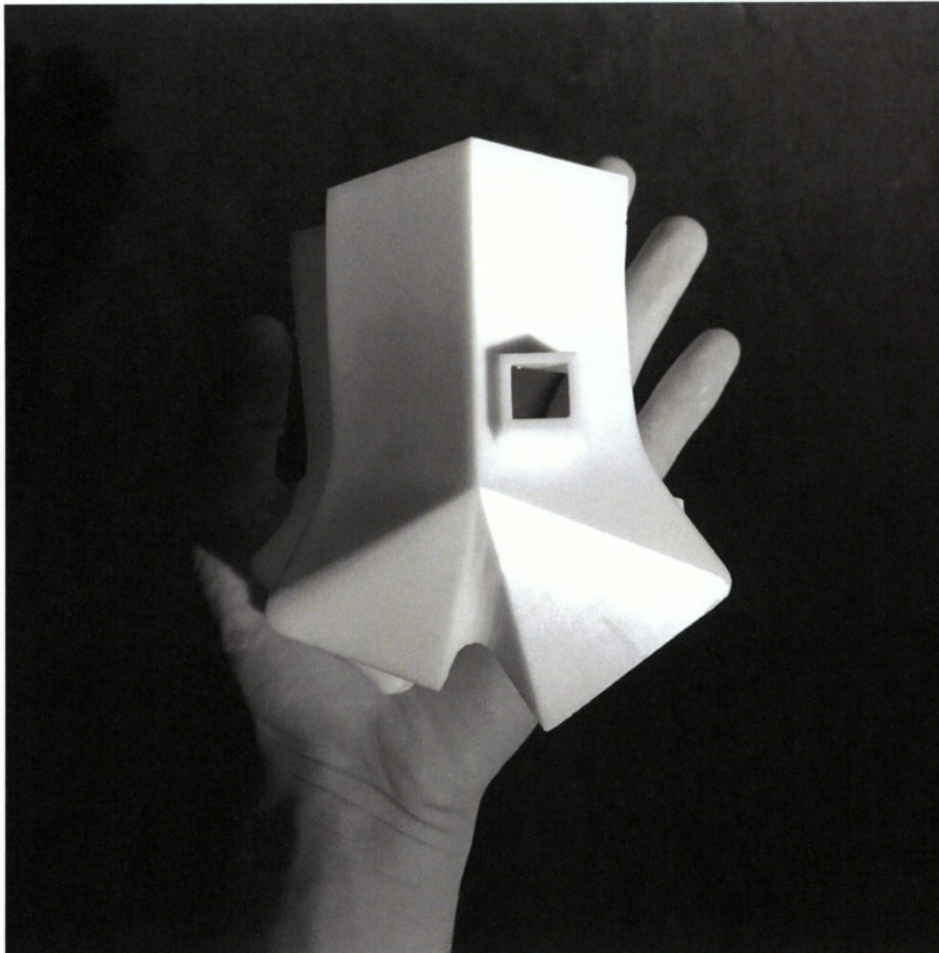


A drive through, of course, circumnavigates the footprint of the home. This is how the home would be viewed from the confines of your vehicle. The drive through window reaches out and pulls on the skin to greet you...



The site begins to privilege vehicular traffic over pedestrian traffic as the porch becomes a threshold to welcome cars. Overall this house or fast food restaurant/house and fast food restaurant becomes an artifact of suburban life that is as familiar as it is unfamiliar, as provocative as it is mundane – it is the house down the street and the McDonald's down the road while simultaneously existing as something else altogether.”





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